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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to develop some understanding of how social experience might be related to public expectations of rights to privacy. A telephone questionnaire was developed which sought information about respondent knowledge, attitudes, and behavior regarding privacy and personal information. A national survey of adults over the age of 18 was administered by professional interviewers to a weighted sample of 981 cases. Results indicated that average citizens are quite concerned about what they identify as illegitimate uses of personal information. Nearly all the variables are skewed toward the privacy protecting poles of each measure. The data with regard to age suggested that although older people are more likely to be the target of direct marketing (and resentful of such annoyances), age did not appear to be related to any understanding of the ways in which personal information is gathered and used for marketing purposes. There were also critical inconsistencies in the data, especially those related to measures of social class, and future research will involve relatively precise classification of the respondent's work experience. (Four tables of data are included. Two appendixes showing questionnaire items and 1979-1989 comparisons are attached along with 26 references.) (MG)

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The Preference for Privacy: In Search of the Social Locations of Privacy Orientations

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Introduction

Depending upon one's perspective, the present moment in the history of the United States can be characterized as the "information age", the "post industrial society" or "the age of surveillance" (Bell, 1976; Flaherty, 1988; Marx, 1988). James Beniger (1986) describes the apparent acceleration in the development and use of computers and telecommunications systems to exploit information as little more than a smooth continuation of the Control Revolution which began in the 1930's with the scheduling of freight trains. Others, such as Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (1988) see society as a whole coming to "function as a giant panoptic mechanism: automatic and continuous surveillance, along with centralized power and peripheral isolation" through which the very "rhythm, texture, and experience of social life–the very segmentation of time and space–are being transformed and informed by capital" (pp. 70, 71). This surveillance activity creates heightened public anxiety about threats to their privacy. An important source of public concern about privacy is associated with what some observers call the insurance model of social policy (Reichman, 1986). Organizations gather increasingly detailed information about clients and consumers in order to reduce the potential for loss of productivity, profits and predictable stability. Reichman sees insurance models as replacing the coercive police function in social relations. In her view "classification, opportunity reduction, and risk spreading are built into the marketplace. The traditional resort to coercion is being supplemented with forms of engineering"(p. 163).

Increased surveillance of persons in their daily lives is incompatible with the social and psychological needs for solitude, and the sense of dignity which control over personal space allows (Altman, 1976; 1977). Novel forms of resistance may develop which weaken the efforts to control. This resistance may take the form of demands on the political system to develop regulations which limit the collection, sharing and use of personal information. Thus, how Americans understand the emerging privacy issues this era may come ultimately to determine the body of laws, practices and and social institutions which will govern the further development of the economy.

Sources of Privacy Orientations

It is rarely held that attitudes and opinions are genetically determined. Instead, we generally argue that concrete social experience is the source of the similarities and differences we find between people. It is generally assumed that individuals from similar backgrounds share similar experiences, and these experiences generate awareness and understanding. Thus, social categories perspectives assume that common experiences in the

lives of women, or Blacks , the poor, or the working classes explain the finding of greater variance between, rather than within such groups. Socioeconomic status has increasingly come under attack for its unreliability as a predictor of attitudes on a range of social issues. The expectation of a indirect or inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and conservatism is no longer supported with regard to a wide range of issues. According to Himmelstein and McRae (1988), the only consisent finding in their analysis of large national databases gathered in 1980 is that "liberalism on social issues tends to increase with education, but even here the relationship varies considerably from issue to issue. " They conclude that "the lack of a consistent relationship reflects both the diversity of the social issues and the fuzziness of the social/economic distinction" (p. 492).

The social experience perspective implies a cumulative, or additive process of attitude development. Each experience contributes in some way to the strength and clarity of any particular attitude, impression or social perception. There are, of course, alternative models for the development of social understanding. There is the sense that repeated exposure to a negative, aversive stimulus over time results in a desensitization, a dulling of the perceptual response, which might eventually be reflected in a change of attitude, or a widening of the latitude of acceptance of some particular behavior. The clearest examples are associated with the apparent impact of repeated exposure to pornographic, or erotic material, not necessarily violent, or agressive. Such viewing under experimental conditions was associated with more permissive attitudes toward rape among both males and females (Malamuth and Billings, 1986).

At the same time, we recognize the potential for a somewhat opposite impact to develop. Rather than desensitization, resentment may build up under the pressure of repeated assaults on one's sense of dignity. Victims of crime may be less persuaded by arguments about the social circumstances which cultivate a criminal lifestyle among urban youth, and as a result these victims may more readily support harsher punishment or greater restrictions on the freedom of those accused of crime.

<u>On the Question of Privacy</u>

The published literature on attitudes toward privacy as an issue of public policy is quite slim (Laufer and Wolfe, 1977; Katz, 1988, Mclosky and Brill, 1983). While a search of the Roper Center database has identified a large number of opinion studies which have included one or more questions about privacy, very few of these studies have actually been introduced into the scholarly literature. Much of the survey research has been conducted on behalf of corporate sponsors, presumably concerned about the implications of emerging policy on their lines of business. The most widely distributed and most frequently cited

studies were financed by Sentry Insurance in 1979(Harris, and Westin, 1979), and by Southern New England Telephone in 1983 (Harris, 1983). The 1979 study identified race, gender, traditional measures of social class, as well as the psychological construct of alienation as important predictors of differences in attitudes and opinions about emerging threats to privacy.

While the work on privacy as it relates to the practices of business and government is quite slim, there is considerably more work available which addresses the interpersonal dimensions of privacy (Derlega and Chairkin, 1977). One particularly interesting study examined the relationship between privacy preferences and the distance at which one sits from strangers on a bench (Kline and Bell, 1983). The underlying psychological construct of "distancing" and environmental control as discussed by Altman (1976; 1977) has relevance to the present study if we consider legal restraints and protections as instruments indivuduals might rely upon to protect their personal space.

Stone, Gueutal, Gardner and McClure (1983) associated differences in attitudes toward privacy with an individual's differential experience with potential abusers of one's right to privacy. The correlations between individuals' experiences and their attitudes, beliefs and intentions regarding privacy were quite low, but were suggestive of the potential which exists for either a direct, or a mediated social influence on a person's awareness and beliefs about privacy.

Expectations of Privacy

While not specifically identified in the Constitution, the right to privacy is seen as being implied in the Third, Fourth, Fifth and Ninth Amendments to the Constitution (Linowes, 1989; Rubin, 1988, Westin, 1967). Numerous federal statutes regulate collection and use of individually identifiable information by private firms, especially with regard to consumer credit. But unfortunately, the law traditionally lags behind the changes in business and government practice that accompany the introduction of new technologies (Jussawalla and Cheah, 1987). And because there have been very few court cases dealing specifically with abuses of personal information privacy, Linowes (1989, p. 13) suggests that we have few judicial precedants upon which to build public expectations of their rights (Tomkovicz, 1985) in the face of new challenges occasioned by the marriage of computers and telecommunications networks (Gandy, 1989). Because individual claims for privacy rights have come to depend upon socially constructed definitions of reasonableness, it becomes important for us to develop some understanding of how social experience might be related to such expectations.

The data presented in this paper are preliminary, but may provide a useful indication of the progress made, and the directions to be taken in pursuing some emerging perspectives on privacy. Following a year in which previous studies were reviewed, and six focus groups sessions were evaluated, an instrument was developed for administration by telephone. The questionnaire sought information about respondent knowledge, attitudes, and behavior regarding privacy and personal information. Specific questions tapped respondent feelings about the appropriateness of corporate use of personal information, especially that generated through consumer transactions. Related questions sought to gather impressions of public sentiment toward privacy preserving and threatening technologies such as Caller*ID and the Call Blocking features of new CLASS (customized local area signalling) telephone services (Johnson, 1989).

A national survey of adults over the age of 18 was administered by professional interviewers between January 15th and February 15th of 1989. A pool of 10,000 numbers was generated through random digit dialing. An attempt was made to interview the adult member of the household who had "most recently celebrated a birthday." Interviewing was terminated when the goal of 1,250 completed interviews was reached. Of the 5376 numbers called, 1749 refused to begin the survey, 137 were terminated because of language difficulties, and an additional 231 respondents terminated for unspecified reasons at some point during the interview. Because this is a study about privacy, the relatively high level of refusals should generate some caution about generalizing too strongly from these data. In addition, in order to correct for an overrepresentation of women in the final sample, all analyses have been performed on a weighted sample of 981 cases.

The Private Citizen Responds

The effort to explore the relationship between attitudes, behavior and age, race and class-based social locations, has been focused primarily on those measures related to telephones and the activities of direct marketers. Respondents were asked a series of questions, presented in random order within groups, which were designed to measure their feelings about specific questions of public policy: a) a set of questions assessing their belief in the need for "strong laws to control the sharing of personal information" with a scale from 1 to 10, where 10= a very great need for strong laws; b) their beliefs about appropriate business practices, such as measured by their degree of agreement with the statement " companies should seek your permission before they tell anyone else about the products you buy, or the services you use"; and c) the actions they have taken to protect their privacy, such as ever refusing "to provide information on an application thay you felt they had no right to ask" [see Appendix 1].

Correlates of these attitudes included a measure of social class based on the employment status of the principal wage earner [WKCLASS]. Scores on this measure ranged from 1 to 3, reflecting wage, salaried and self-employed status . Racial/ethnic group membership was examined in terms of dummy dichotomous variables for self-identification as Black or Hispanic. Age was measured as a continuous variable, although re-configured into 5 cohorts for an analyses of variance.

A factor analysis was performed on 24 attitude variables which were coded from 6-10, where six represented strong agreement, and ten represented strong disagreement with each statement. The solution identified eight factors accounting for 48% of the variance in these measures. On the basis of the variables which loaded high on a single factor, we identified an "anti-list" factor which accounted for 5.3% of the measured variance. The three variables were: a) "there should be a way to keep your name off mailing lists"; b) "you have a right to have your name removed from any mailing list"; and c) "companies should seek your permission before they tell anyone else what products you buy."

An analysis of variance was performed with the means of factor scores for groups identified by gender, race, education and work status. All reflected significant differences overall (See Table One). The data suggest a clear class distinction, that is, income, education, and work status, all of which are related to race, are linked with views toward the activities of the list industry. Women tended to express views which were closer to those of the well-educated members of entrepreneurial families. These groups felt more srongly that the individual should maintain control over their transaction histories. These differences are evident even though the general distribution of responses is highly skewed toward a preference for greater individual control over the personal information captured in mailing lists.

Table One
Analysis of Anti-List Factor Means

Gender (F=3.85, p<.05)
- Male=.064
- Female=-.062

Race (overall F=2.75, p<.01)
- White=-.052
- Black=.310
- Hispanic=.402

Schooling (F=5.78, p<.01)
- Low=.269
- Medium=-.003
- High=-.116

Workstatus (Overall F=5.55, p<.001)
- Self-employed=-.111
- Salaried=-.063
- Hourly=.052

Three additional questions tapped respondent attitudes about the telephone and personal information: a) "phone numbers called from my home are my business and no one elses"; b) "it would be good to know who was calling before you answered the phone"; and c) "someone should invent a telephone that would automatically screen out calls from people trying to sell you things." Table Two presents a matrix of correlations

Table Two

Correlation (Pearson) Matrix (N=970)

List Related Beliefs

	2	3	4	5	6
1) PhoneMyBus	.100	.105	.106	.08	.026
2) KeepNameOff		.207	.159	.087	.143
3) RemoveName			.123	.068	.052
4) SeekPerm				.077	.096
5) WhoCalls					.289
6) AutoScreen					

With N=970, r>.06, P<.05

between these variables. We note that nearly all the variables are significant correlates of each other. The primary exceptions are the most anti-sales measure (AutoScreen), and the measure of a claim of property rights in called numbers (PhoneMyBus). The strongest correlation (r=.289) is between the kinds of services which might be provided as part of new CLASS offerings by telephone companies. Those who most want caller identification, would most prefer to use it to exclude unsolicited calls. The very low correlation (r=.026) between the expectation of privacy measure (PhoneMyBus) and the desire for a technical response (AutoScreen) suggests that those most concerned about the annoyance of direct marketing calls, are not particularly aware, or concerned about the proceedures through which their names are added to a marketing database.

Respondents were asked several questions which sought to determine the nature of their resistance to privacy invasions (Appendix One). A relatively high proportion, 35.1% reported having refused to provide information on an application that they felt the organization had no right to ask. A somewhat smaller proportion (31.7% reported having requested that their names be removed from a mailing list at some time in the past. A still

smaller proportion (11.3%) report having taking the passive route, and failed to apply for some service because of the questions they expected to be asked.

With regard to regulatory relief, respondents estimate of the need for strong laws protecting the sharing of personal information ranked control of credit card data as being needed most (mean=7.094), with control over the records of consumer purchases as the area least in need of strong laws (mean=6.002).

Table Three presents the relations between these selected attitudes, opinions, preferences and behavioral responses and measures of race, ethnicity, age and class status. The partial correlations reflect the strength of the relationships when the influence of education and income have been statistically removed, or held constant.

The relationship between social class status, as measured by the wage relation and privacy is neither strong, nor very straightforward. There is a tendency for respondents from families with greater autonomy to wish for greater legal restraint to be applied to the use of consumer information. But while this autonomy is associated with the desire to keep their names off mailing lists, they have little apparent desire to have a screening device, to know who is calling before they answer the phone, or even to expect that companies will seek their permission before sharing information about their purchases. Blacks and Hispanics were relatively uninterested in legal recourse, and have little interest in having their names removed from mailing lists.

Table Three

Social Locations of Privacy Orientations

Partial Correlations (N=796)

(Controlling for Education and Income)

Privacy	Age	Black	Latino	WkClass
PhomyBus	-.0157	-.0210	-.0236	.0076
SeekPerm	-.0046	-.0158	.0219	.0691*
WhoCalls	-.0135	-.0111	-.0671*	.0586*
AutoScreen	-.0934**	.0071	.0598*	.0426
RemovName	-.0198	.0169	.0443	-.0073
KeepNoff	-.1092***	.0907**	.1173***	-.0781*
LawLists	.1521***	-.0358	-.0112	.0509
CardLaw	.0934**	-.0011	.0210	.0222
PhoneLaw	.0850**	-.0283	-.0541	.0042
ConsumLaw	.0694*	.0388	-.0257	.0493

*=p<.05, **=P<.01, ***=p<.001

Age emerges as the most important correlate of privacy related attitudes and behavior. The strongest association with age is with the perceived need for strong laws controlling the sharing of personal information in mailing lists (r=.15). This concern is also reflected in the strong age-related link to two associated attitude measures. One [Keepnoff] suggests that "there should be a way to keep your name off certain mailing lists". The older the respondent, the more likely they were to agree with that statement. Similarly, another measure [AutoScreen] which assessed agreement with the statement that "someone should invent a telephone that would automatically screen out calls from people trying to sell you things," was associated with age (-.09). The older the respondent, the more likely they were to agree that such a device was desirable.

Seniors Under Assault

The strength and consistency of the age linked patterns raises a critical question about the stability of patterns and the interpretation of age as a source of influence. Age can be considered as a life-cycle phenomenon where particular kinds of experiences are thought to be common to all within particular age cohorts. Age can also be seen in historical terms,

where specific events in the past, such as the experience of the depression, or the red-baiting of the McCarthy era, may be seen to explain common orientations toward business or government. Critical changes in the experiences of age cohorts may explain age differences at different periods in time.

Table Four
Privacy and Age
Partial Correlations
(Controlling for Income)

Variable	1979	1989
TrustGov't	-0.086***	0.109***
PrivHide	-0.112***	-0.011
Finances	-0.082**	-0.022
Insurers	-0.174***	0.022
CardLaw	0.084***	0.091**
MedicLaw	-0.044	0.026
InsurLaw	-0.089***	0.045
WorkLaw	-0.098***	0.002
PhoneLaw	-0.032	0.062*
List Law	0.004	0.150***
N=	1,257	824

*=p<.05, **=P<.01, ***=p<.001, one-tailed.

Ten questions in the 1989 survey [Appendix 2] were identified which were very similar to questions asked by Harris and Westin in 1979 (1979). Table Four presents the partial correlations between these variables (which were recoded for common direction) and age (measured as a continuous variable). In each of the ten comparisons, the associations between age and the measured variables tended to reflect less concern about privacy in 1979 than in 1989. The only correlation which remained essentially unchanged was the association between age and the belief that there needed to be greater regulatory control over credit data. That association was positive and significant in 1979 as well as in 1989.

Discussion

What might all this mean? It is clear that the average citizen is quite concerned about what they identify as illigitimate uses of personal information. Nearly all the variables are skewed toward the privacy protecting poles of each measure. The nature of the distributions necessarily limits the magnitude of the correlations between these measures and our indices of social location. However, what little variance there is, is related in understandable ways to these social locations. The data with regard to age, given the controls for education and income, suggest that the older you are, the more likely you are to be the target of direct marketing, and the more you will come to resent such annoyances. Unfortunately, at least with regard to serving as a basis for recommending appropriate regulatory restraints, age does not appear to be related to any understanding of the ways in which personal information is gathered and used for marketing purposes.

There are also critical inconsistencies in the data, especially those related to our measures of social class. Work planned for the immediate future involves relatively precise classification of the work experience of the respondent, rather than the principal wage earner. This classification will be made in terms of a presumption that indviduals will be subjected to different levels of supervisory oversight in particular occupations. Such a specification will allow us to examine the potential of the desensitization hypothesis more directly. Measures of involvement in the consumer culture, as indicated in posession of an ATM card, and recent mail and telephone purchases will be pursued as a calibrator of resentment to direct marketing appeals. Measures of political activity and interest will be pursued for their potential to help us understand orientations toward legislative solutions.

There is little doubt that the issue of personal information privacy is destined to become increasingly important topic of public policy debates. Communications scholars should take the lead in developing a theoretical base upon which to develop policy recommendations that reflect an understanding of the complex and contradictory interests involved. This paper is offered as a preliminary contribution to this effort.

Appendix One
Questionnaire Items, 1989 Survey

Regarding the need for strong laws:

"On a scale from 1 to 10, here 1 is equal to no need for strong laws and 10 is equal to a very great need for, how great is the need for strong laws concerning the sharing of personal information regarding..."

1. Consumer Purchases [CONSUMLAW]
2. Telephone Call Records [PHONELAW]
3. Credit Cards [CARDLAW]
4. Mailing Lists [LAWLISTS]

Forms of Resistance:

1. "Have you ever requested that your name be removed from a mailing list, or not be sold to other companies?" [RequestRemoval]
2. "Have you ever provided false or misleading information in response to a question you felt a company had no right to ask?" [FalseInfo]
3. "Have you ever refused to provide information on an application that you felt they had no right to ask?" [Refused Info]
4. "Have you ever failed to apply for something, like a job, credit or insurance because you did not want to provide all the information you thought they would ask? [Failapply]
5. "Do you have, or have you ever had an unlisted number?" [Unlisted Phone]
6. "Have you ever been asked, but refused to participate in a survey?" [Refused Survey]

Privacy Perspectives:

"Please say whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree..."

1. " You have the right to have your name removed from any mailing list." [Removenm]
2. "There should be a way to keep your name off certain mailing lists." [Keepnoff]

3. "Someone should invent a telephone that would automatically screen out calls from people trying to sell you things." [AutoScreen]

4. " It would be good to know who is calling before I answer the phone." [WhoCalls]

5. "Companies should seek your permission before they tell anyone else about the products you buy, or the services you use." [Seekperm]

6. "The numbers I call from my home are my business and no one elses." [Phomybus]

Appendix Two

1979-1989 Comparisons

GOVTRUST

1979. " Government can generally be trusted to look after our interests"[0,1]

1989. "The government can generally be trusted to look out after my interests."[1-5]

PRIVHIDE

1979. "Most people who complain about their privacy are ingaged in immoral or illegal conduct."[0.1]

1989. "The only people who are concerned about their privacy are people with something to hide."[1-5]

FINANCES

1979. Index. Banks+Finance Companies+Credit bureaus "should be doing more to keep personal information they have on individuals confidential."[0-3]

1989. "Banks, finance companies and credit bureaus should be doing more to keep personal information confidential."[1-5]

INSURERS

1979. Index, Alpha=.789. Life, health and medical insurers should <u>not</u> have the right to collect 6 types of personal information.

1989. Scale. 1=agree strongly, 5=disagree strongly. "Insurance companies should be able to gather all the information they need in order to be able to choose between applicants."[1-5]

LAWS: CARDLAW, MEDICLAW, INSURLAW, WORKLAW, PHONELAW, LISTLAW

1979. "It is important that Congress pass legislation" regarding Credit Cards; Medicine and Health, Employers, Telephone company call records, Mailing Lists.[0,1]

1989. "How great is the need for strong laws concerning the sharing of personal information regarding..." Credit cards, medicine and health, Employment, Telephopne call records, Mailing lists.[1-10]

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